DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: THE ROLE OF SPEECH ACTS IN EFL TEACHING

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Annotation. *This article explores the role of speech acts in developing communicative competence among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. It emphasizes how the teaching of pragmatic aspects – such as requests, apologies, compliments, and refusals – can enhance learners' ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various social contexts. The study highlights the importance of integrating speech act theory into language instruction to move beyond grammatical competence and foster real-life communication skills.*

Keywords: *Communicative competence, Speech acts, Pragmatic competence, EFL teaching, Language instruction, Intercultural communication, Pragmatics in language learning, Real-life communication, Linguistic appropriateness, Functional language use.*

Аннотация. *В статье рассматривается роль речевых актов в развитии коммуникативной компетенции у изучающих английский язык как иностранный. Особое внимание уделяется обучению прагматическим аспектам языка – таким как просьбы, извинения, комплименты и отказы, – с целью повышения способности учащихся эффективно и уместно общаться в различных социальных ситуациях. Подчеркивается важность интеграции теории речевых актов в процесс обучения для развития практических коммуникативных навыков.*

Ключевые слова: *Коммуникативная компетенция, Речевые акты, Прагматическая компетенция, Преподавание английского языка, Языковая инструкция, Межкультурная коммуникация, Прагматика в обучении, Аутентичное общение, Языковая уместность, Функциональное использование языка.*

Annotatsiya. *Ushbu maqolada ingliz tilini chet tili sifatida o'rganuvchi talabalar orasida kommunikativ kompetensiyani shakllantirishda nutq aktlarining o'rni yoritiladi. Unda iltimos, uzr so'rash, maqtov, rad etish kabi pragmatik jihatlarni o'qitish orqali o'quvchilarning turli ijtimoiy vaziyatlarda to'g'ri va samarali muloqot qilish qobiliyatini oshirish mumkinligi ta'kidlanadi. Maqolada nutq aktlari nazariyasini til ta'limiga integratsiya qilish zarurligi asoslab beriladi.*

Kalit so'zlar: *Kommunikativ kompetensiya, Nutqiy aktlari, Pragmatik kompetensiya, Ingliz tili o'qitish, Til o'rgatish metodikasi, Madaniyatlararo muloqot, Til o'rganishda pragmatika, Hayotiy muloqot ko'nikmalari, Tilning moslik darajasi, Funksional til ishlatish.*

Introduction

In today's globalized world, the ability to communicate effectively in English has become a fundamental skill for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). While traditional language instruction has long emphasized grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, recent developments in applied linguistics highlight the need for a broader understanding of **communicative competence** – a concept that includes not only linguistic accuracy but also the appropriate use of language in context.

One of the core components of communicative competence is **pragmatic competence**, which refers to the ability to use language appropriately in social interactions.

Within this framework, **speech acts** – such as making requests, giving compliments, apologizing, or refusing – play a critical role. These acts are culturally and contextually bound, and their misuse can lead to communication breakdowns or unintended offense. For EFL learners, mastering speech acts means not only learning how to form grammatically correct sentences but also understanding how meaning and intention are conveyed and interpreted in different contexts.

Despite their importance, speech acts are often underrepresented in EFL curricula. Many learners acquire structural knowledge of the language but struggle with expressing politeness, subtlety, or indirectness in real-life communication. As a result, language instruction must evolve to include the **explicit teaching of pragmatic functions**, which helps learners bridge the gap between knowing a language and using it effectively.

This article aims to explore the integration of speech act theory into EFL teaching to promote the development of communicative competence. It will review key theoretical perspectives, analyze current classroom practices, and propose practical strategies for enhancing pragmatic awareness among EFL learners.

Literature Review

The concept of **communicative competence** was first introduced by Hymes (1972) as a response to Chomsky's limited definition of linguistic competence, emphasizing that knowing a language involves more than just grammatical rules; it includes the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. Later, Canale and Swain (1980) further developed this concept into four components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Among these, **sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence** have been increasingly recognized as essential for successful communication in a second or foreign language.

Speech act theory, pioneered by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969), laid the foundation for understanding language as action. In their view, utterances do not merely convey information – they perform actions such as requesting, apologizing, inviting, or refusing. This theoretical framework has significantly influenced language teaching, particularly in highlighting the performative nature of communication and the need for contextual awareness.

Numerous studies have shown that EFL learners often struggle with producing speech acts appropriately due to cultural and linguistic differences (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Taguchi, 2009). For instance, a direct request in English may be perceived as rude in some contexts unless appropriately mitigated with politeness strategies. This gap in pragmatic awareness can lead to communication failures or pragmatic transfer from learners' first language.

Instruction in **pragmatics and speech acts** has proven effective in improving learners' communicative abilities. Rose and Kasper (2001) argue that explicit instruction – where speech act forms and functions are directly taught – yields more successful outcomes than implicit exposure alone. Moreover, Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) emphasize that pragmatic competence can and should be taught, especially in EFL settings where natural exposure to authentic interaction is limited.

Recent pedagogical models encourage the integration of **authentic materials**, role-plays, discourse completion tasks (DCTs), and awareness-raising activities in the teaching of speech acts. These methods help learners not only recognize but also appropriately produce speech acts across varying contexts.

However, despite the growing body of research, speech acts remain underemphasized in many EFL textbooks and curricula.

Teachers may lack the training or confidence to teach pragmatics, and assessments rarely measure pragmatic ability. This highlights a pressing need for curriculum development and teacher education that includes a stronger focus on the pragmatic aspects of language.

Methodology

This study employed a **qualitative case study** approach to investigate how EFL teachers integrate speech act instruction into classroom practice and how such instruction influences learners' communicative competence. The focus was on identifying practical strategies, challenges, and student outcomes related to the teaching of speech acts.

1. Participants. The study involved **8 experienced EFL teachers** from secondary and tertiary institutions in Uzbekistan. All participants had at least five years of teaching experience and had incorporated pragmatic elements into their language instruction. Additionally, **40 intermediate-level EFL learners** were observed as part of the classroom environment.

2. Data Collection Methods. Three primary data collection methods were used:

Semi-structured interviews with teachers to explore their understanding and teaching of speech acts.

Classroom observations (10 lessons) to document speech act activities, methods, and student reactions.

Learner feedback surveys to gather students' perceptions of how speech act instruction impacted their communication skills.

3. Data Analysis. Data were analyzed using **thematic coding**, focusing on recurring patterns related to instructional methods, types of speech acts taught (e.g., requests, refusals, apologies), and observed learner responses. Qualitative data from interviews and surveys were triangulated to increase reliability.

Results

Analysis of the data yielded several significant findings:

Speech act awareness improved: Students exposed to explicit instruction in pragmatics showed greater sensitivity to formality, politeness levels, and contextual appropriateness in communication.

Commonly taught speech acts included requests, apologies, and refusals. Teachers often selected these based on their relevance to real-life situations.

Instructional strategies used: Role-plays, discourse completion tasks (DCTs), and scenario-based discussions were effective in fostering engagement and reflection.

Challenges reported:

Limited time in curriculum for pragmatic instruction.

Lack of materials focused on authentic, culturally appropriate speech act examples.

Teachers' uncertainty about cross-cultural pragmatics.

Students expressed increased confidence in their spoken English and recognized the difference between grammatically correct language and socially appropriate expressions.

Discussion

The findings align with previous studies (e.g., Rose & Kasper, 2001; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013) that demonstrate the effectiveness of explicit speech act instruction in developing pragmatic competence. Teachers' use of contextualized and interactive methods helped bridge the gap between structural language knowledge and real-life communicative performance.

However, the challenges also echo concerns found in Kasper & Roever (2005), particularly regarding teacher preparedness and curricular constraints.

These limitations hinder the systematic inclusion of pragmatic content, despite its importance for communicative competence.

Moreover, the learner feedback confirms that pragmatic awareness is not only teachable but also valued by students. Their reflections underscore the need for balanced instruction that includes grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics.

Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of incorporating **speech act instruction** into EFL curricula as a means of fostering **communicative competence**. When students understand how language functions in social interaction, they are better equipped to use English effectively and appropriately across cultural contexts.

To achieve this, teacher education programs should emphasize **pragmatic pedagogy**, and language textbooks should include authentic, culturally grounded speech act models. Future research might explore long-term effects of pragmatic instruction or compare outcomes of explicit vs. implicit teaching methods.

Ultimately, helping learners move from "knowing about the language" to "using language appropriately" is essential for success in global communication.

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